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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [TS](#)

SUBJECT: SENIOR BEN ALI ADVISOR DEFENDS TUNISIAN ELECTION
PROCESS

REF: A. TUNIS 746 (NOTAL)

[1](#)B. TUNIS 741 (NOTAL)

[1](#)C. TUNIS 725 (NOTAL)

[1](#)D. TUNIS 694 (NOTAL)

Classified by Ambassador Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Tunisia may have a tendency to move slow on democratic change, but there has been tangible progress since the Bourguiba era, senior Ben Ali advisor Abdelaziz Ben Dhia told the Ambassador. Two prominent political rivals lacked credibility and were more skilled at complaining than in building public support, he maintained. The ruling party goes out of its way to make room for the opposition, he added. Ben Dhia also (disingenuously) maintained that international observers would be welcome to watch the October 25 polls. Ben Dhia's best attempts at spin cannot alter the fact that the GOT has carefully engineered the elections later this month to preclude any element of competition. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) During an October 8 introductory call that included discussions on Iran and the Middle East peace process (septels/notal), Minister of State Abdelaziz Ben Dhia, President Ben Ali's senior advisor, gave the Ambassador an unprompted defense of the Tunisian election process and the credibility of the Presidential and Legislative Elections that will be staged on October 25 (reftels). "We have a cultural tendency to move slowly and cautiously (on democratic development)," Ben Dhia told the Ambassador. "But we have been on a good path, moving toward international norms since November 7" (when Ben Ali deposed the aging and increasingly detached Habib Bourguiba in 1989).

[1](#)3. (C) Ben Dhia was dismissive of prominent opponents of Ben Ali, contended they have no meaningful public support. "Ben Jaafar (whose candidacy was rejected on technical grounds by election officials) is now posing as a victim...and Najib Chebbi (another strong GOT critic and opposition party leader) was my student," Ben Dhia stated. "I told them they need to convince the citizens...to build a base...instead they travel to Paris every week," and plead their case abroad. Both Chebbi and Ben Jaafar "chose to ignore the rules of the game," and now pose as victims, he maintained.

[1](#)4. (C) Ben Dhia argued that the ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) bent over backwards to make space on the political stage for opposition. "No other party in the world voluntarily gives 25 percent of its seats to the opposition," Ben Dhia asserted. (Note: The 25 percent quota is stipulated in Tunisia's electoral code as amended in [1](#)1999. End note.) Ben Ali had made these and other changes to make Tunisian politics more representative and participatory than they had been in the Bourguiba era, Ben Dhia maintained.

[1](#)5. (C) Asked by the Ambassador about international participation in the elections (coming up on October 25), Ben

Dhia said international "observers" would be welcome but "monitors" would not. Foreign oversight would be "an insult to our civilization," he maintained. Foreigners would be welcome to "watch but not direct," the election. (Comment: These assertions were disingenuous. The Tunisian Government has never invited trained, credible international observation. It appears intent on inviting a handful of obscure international "dignitaries" who will be wined, dined, and pampered by the GOT in exchange for a favorable assessment. We are not aware of any suggestion of international management or direction of Tunisian elections. End comment.)

¶6. (C) Comment: Ben Dhia's best attempts at spin cannot alter the fact that the GOT, as outlined in reftels, has carefully engineered the elections later this month to preclude any element of competition. The deck is stacked heavily against a genuine challenge to Ben Ali. In fact, of Ben Ali's three "opponents," one is the First Lady's cousin and a second was allegedly asked to run after he had already endorsed Ben Ali earlier this year. End comment.
GRAY